

Christmas and the Humility of Yahweh

To really appreciate and understand the Old Testament, one needs to place it in the religious and cultural context of the Ancient Near East. Having done this, one can then see how much the Old Testament shares with that world and also how much it differs.

Take, for example, the Tabernacle that Yahweh commanded Moses to construct, the house and shrine where He would dwell in the midst of His people. The dimensions and details of its construction are spelled out in the Law, enabling us to gain some notion of what it was like. But to really understand its deeper significance one needs to compare it to other shrines and temples in the Ancient Near East.

One such shrine was the Temple of Karnak, built by the Egyptian Ramesses III in about 1170 B.C. It was a tremendous edifice, measuring about 230 long, 88 feet wide with columns 23 feet high, and part of a much larger complex of temples and buildings. Those beholding it and entering to worship the god for whom it was built would understand the greatness of the deity: the splendor of the temple reflected the glory of the one worshipped there.

Moving from Egypt to Greece, one could examine the Parthenon, the temple of the goddess Athena. This temple, dominating the acropolis of Athens, was 220 feet long by 101 feet wide. Like the temple in Karnak and other ancient shrines, it shone with brilliant color, reflecting the divine beauty of the goddess whose image it housed.

Compare such outward architectural splendor to the shrine that Yahweh told His people to build. He gave them explicit directions for the construction of His shrine, and told Israel to build it precisely according to specifications. To ancient eyes used to large and splendid monuments, the Mosaic shrine was almost embarrassingly modest: the shrine itself was a mere tent, measuring 45 feet long by 15 wide, and subdivided into two spaces. The inner tent, the Holy of Holies, measured a mere 15 feet by 15 feet. There was no splendid image visible there, merely a small portable wooden box (or Ark) measuring 52 inches by 31 inches and 31 inches which lay hidden within the inner tent. The box was made of wood and was covered with gold plate, and could be easily carried about with poles inserted through the rings on the side. The entire courtyard containing the shrine was fenced in by a series of curtains hung between poles, and it measured a mere 150 feet long by 75 feet wide. The curtains blocking the shrine from view were a mere 7 feet high—barely high enough to hide it from view. Ancient pagans observing all this would have said, “You call this a shrine?” In fairness, it was made by a group of newly-liberated slaves in the desert, using whatever materials they could find in the wilderness and whatever they had brought with them when they hurriedly left Egypt.

The shrine was deliberately portable, because although it was constructed in the wilderness, it was intended to be carried into the Promised Land when Israel arrived there. The shrine therefore was deliberately designed to be taken down and packed away for carrying (like Bedouin tents), and then set up in a new location. God did not designate a permanent site for the shrine when Israel entered Canaan. Rather, it was to move from location to location as God decreed, and wherever it was set up it would form the hub around which Israelite life would revolve. Worshipers from all the twelve tribes would leave their homes to journey to the shrine wherever it was located to offer their sacrifices there and seek the blessing of Yahweh.

After David conquered Jebus (later called Jerusalem) he made it his capital. And then he had a brilliant idea: he would relocate the Mosaic shrine to his city. At a stroke this would unite the civil capital with the religious center and unify the twelve tribes around his leadership, since all Israel would have to come to his city to worship Yahweh.

As David began to plan for the future (including a plan to build himself a proper palace, one fit for a king such as he had become), he was concerned that the Mosaic tent shrine was far too modest. He could see as well as anyone else in his day how comparatively paltry and pathetic Yahweh’s shrine looked

compared to the more splendid temples of his day. Other gods were worshipped in impressive and durable structures of wood and stone; should the God of Israel be housed in a tent like a common Bedouin? So it was that he planned to build a more durable shrine and temple for his God. He ran the plan by the court prophet Nathan, who immediately gave him the prophetic “thumbs up”.

As it turned out, Nathan spoke a bit prematurely. After Nathan told David that God would certainly approve of his plan, God appeared to Nathan and said otherwise. Nathan therefore returned to David (perhaps a bit sheepishly) with another word: “Go and tell My servant David, ‘Thus says Yahweh: Would you build Me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for My dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel did I speak a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people saying, ‘Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?’” (2 *Samuel* 7:5-7)

From this it was clear that Yahweh was perfectly content with such a modest shrine. It was not created as a kind of wilderness stopgap until something more suitable could be built. It was just fine the way it was. Moreover, as if to gently put David in his place, God continued, “Far from you building Me a house, I will be you a house”. The “house” [Hebrew *beth*] that God would build David was, of course, not an architectural structure, but a secure dynasty. Using a play on words, Yahweh promised David that his dynasty would abide forever, and not be replaced by that of another man, as the House of David had replaced the House of Saul. As part of this gift, one of David’s sons would be the one to build a more permanent structure for the Mosaic shrine (2 *Samuel* 7:13). The reference, it turned out, was of course to Solomon.

What does Yahweh’s evident contentment with such a small, modest, and—dare we say it, pokey—little shrine mean? Two things.

First it means that no matter how great and magnificent a temple one could build, it would still be utterly inadequate to represent and reveal His glory. Such was the transcendent greatness of Yahweh that nothing that any created being could build could begin to do it justice. Therefore the project of building a temple worthy of Him was not even attempted, and the humble Bedouin-like shrine stood as a vivid witness to the disparity between God’s glory and man’s ability to adequately honor it.

Even King Solomon who built the Temple knew this. At the dedication of the Temple, as part of his long prayer, he said, “Will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built!” (1 *Kings* 8:27) The Church echoed this insight: when St. Stephen was on trial for his life on a charge of dishonoring the Law and the Temple, he said, “The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands—as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is My throne and earth My footstool. What house will you build for Me, says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest? Did not My hand make all these things?’” (Acts 7:48-50, citing *Isaiah* 66:1-2). However glorious a temple one might build for Yahweh, the disparity remains.

Second and perhaps more importantly, the modesty of the Mosaic shrine reveals the humility of Yahweh—a humility which would lead eventually to Christmas and the Incarnation. As David discovered, God was not concerned for His dignity on the international stage. It did not bother Him that an Egyptian god or a Greek goddess had a more impressive shrine than He had. He was content to dwell within a tiny tent, built on the model of Bedouin dwellings. In the tent shrine erected by Moses, the divine humility shines forth—and challenges our pride as well. If our Lord and God showed such humility, how dare we proudly strut through the earth?

For those of us who have seen the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus, the simplicity of the Mosaic tent was a prophecy of the humility of Christ. Over two millennia ago, God chose an even humbler and a more cramped abode than the tents of Moses—the womb of a young Jewish peasant girl, an adolescent with no connections to the rich and powerful. From there He lay in a tiny animal feeding trough, and

then lived in the insignificant village of Nazareth, where He got slivers in His hands as He learned the trade of a carpenter. Like His Mother, He had no worldly connections with important people, no vast resources, and at length not even a place to lay His head. His followers were fishermen, tax-collectors, sinners, people of the land. Some in His day thought it inconceivable that such a humble person could be the Messiah. But we know that the divine humility which was content to attach its transcendent and glorious Name to humble nomadic tents would not scruple to become incarnate in a humble carpenter. The divine glory always veils itself in this age—whether behind the literal veils of a rustic desert shrine or in the human flesh of a Jewish carpenter. The rusticity of the Mosaic shrine pointed ahead to the voluntary humility of the coming Messiah. The humility of Yahweh surprised David. Later on, starting from Bethlehem, it would surprise the world.